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ARGENTINA PROJECT (S200000044)
DEPT. OF STATE, A/RPS/TPG
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() Release () Excise () Deny

Exemption(s):

Declassify: () In Part () In Full

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Date March 29, 1978
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LAURENCE R. BIRNS, DIRECTOR

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Dear Secretary Christopher:

We are writing you at this time to express our appreciation to you for your efforts to improve the human rights situation in Latin America, and specifically in Argentina. We also wish to use this note to you to comment on some recent developments in Argentina, and to offer some recommendations regarding the plight of political prisoners and their relatives in that country.

The executive and legislative branches of the U.S. Government have taken numerous initiatives intended to encourage greater respect for basic human rights by the Argentine military government. The termination of military aid programs, the restriction of sales of certain military materiel, and the negative votes of the U.S. in the international lending institutions have all played a significant role in impressing Argentine authorities of the serious importance that the U.S. attributes to that nation's human rights practices.

Last November, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance delivered to the Government of Argentina a list of persons imprisoned, disappeared or killed for political reasons, and formally asked the Argentine military authorities to supply the U.S. government with information as to the charges against them, and their places of detention. Other governments, the United Nations' Human Rights Commission, and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights also have made similar inquiries.

Unfortunately, there has been no response to these concerns, and no real improvement in the human rights situation in Argentina. Kidnappings continue to take place, and right wing terrorist groups within the security forces continue to act with total impunity

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despite the fact that the government has shown great efficiency in eliminating left-wing subversion.

As an ostensible concession to this U.S. human rights concern, the Government of Argentina published the names of several thousand political detainees. This gesture was seen by some officials in this country as an indication of a new trend towards moderation on the part of the local authorities.

In our view these hopes were premature, if not overly optimistic. Few prisoners are actually being released while new arrests and disappearances continue. As for the names of prisoners which had been published, a careful examination of those listed shows that the majority of them had been detained during the administration of Mrs. Isabel Peron, prior to the military takeover of March 1976. The Argentine Government actually disclosed little information about the thousands of persons who have disappeared in the last two years, and actually denies having any knowledge of the fate of most of them.

It should be noted that the Argentine Government has failed to respond, either publicly or privately, to Secretary of State Vance's personal request, made during his trip to Argentina last year, for information on the situation of prisoners included in the list which he presented to the local authorities during his visit. This list, originally prepared by the Argentine Information and Service Center, has now been updated, expanded and corrected to include nearly 10,000 names.

Meanwhile, prison conditions have continued to deteriorate in Argentina leading to protests and violent confrontations between prisoners and security forces. Last March 14, 165 prisoners in Wing #7 of the Villa Devoto prison on the outskirts of Buenos Aires began to protest, peacefully, prison-living conditions. After a series of still-to-be-clarified events, 61 prisoners were dead and many more were seriously injured. There is evidence contradicting the official government version that only common criminals died, and that they died of smoke inhalation and not gunfire.

Irrespective of how these people died or what was their status, these events should be seen as an indication of the deplorable conditions reigning in Argentine prisons and the desperation of the imprisoned. However, there is every reason to believe that at least some at the Villa Devoto prison were killed by security forces and, as the attached list might illustrate, at least some may have been political prisoners.

Given the critical nature of the situation, we would hope that you would be moved to instruct Ambassador Castro to provide the Argentine Government with the new updated and expanded list of political prisoners and disappeared persons and request, once again, information about their places of detention and the charges against them. We also hope that you would see the merit of the U.S. continuing to vote against multilateral loans to Argentina until a noticeable improvement takes place in the human rights situation there, and actively encourage other nations to join the U.S. in these initiatives. In this spirit, we also wish to raise the desirability of suspending all sales and deliveries of military materiel to Argentina until congressional as well as executive inquiries on pressing human rights matters are satisfactorily answered.

Finally, given the status of political prisoners in the country, we hope that the administration will encourage the immediate implementation of the parole visa program recently recommended by the Attorney General for political prisoners and others wishing to leave Argentina, and that no respite take place in the sanctions that have been taken against the Argentine government until a significant, rather than token, change in the current situation occurs.



Laurence R. Birns
Director

Mr. Warren Christopher
Deputy Secretary of State
Department of State
Washington DC 20520

Enclosures